

"MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY RESPONSE
TO THE HOLOCAUST"

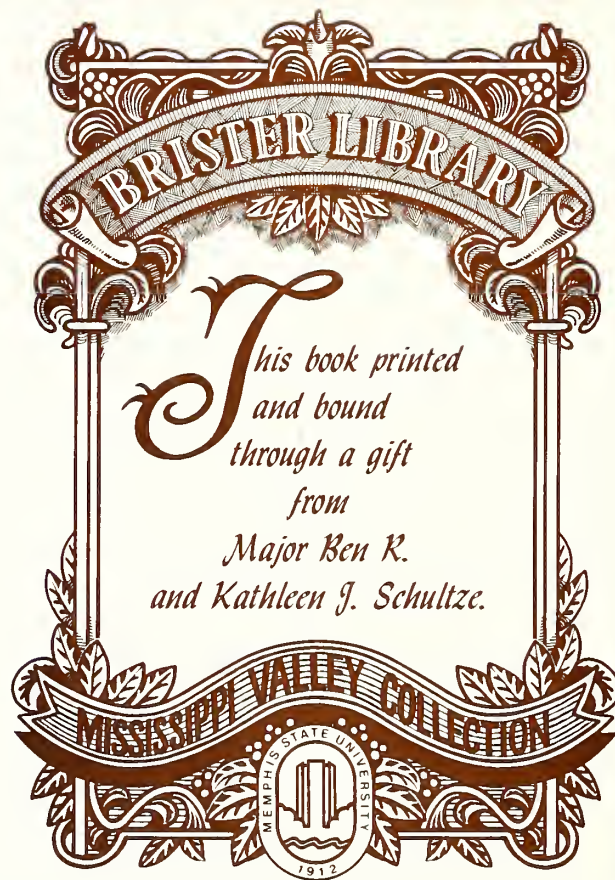
INTERVIEW WITH SAM MARGOLIN

OCTOBER 25, 1989

BY A. MARK LEVIN

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF MEMPHIS AND ITS AWARENESS OF, AND
RESPONSE TO, THE GROWING CRISIS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN
GERMANY UNDER HITLER, 1938 - 1939

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STUDENT, ORAL HISTORY CLASS, DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

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**Statement to be Made by The
Interviewer At The Beginning Of
Each Interview**

This is Memphis State University Oral History Research Office project:

"The Memphis Jewish Community and its response to the

growing crisis of the Jewish community in Germany

under Hitler, 1938-1939"

Date: Wednesday, October 25, 1989

Interview with (Name): Mr. Sam Margolin

550 South Yates Rd.

Address : Memphis, Tennessee 38119

Interviewer: A. Mark Levin

THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY CLASS OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "THE MEMPHIS JEWISH COMMUNITY AND ITS AWARENESS OF, AND RESPONSE TO, THE GROWING CRISIS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN GERMANY UNDER HITLER, CULMINATING IN KRISTALNACHT (NOVEMBER, 1938) AND THE JOURNEY OF THE ST. LOUIS (MAY/JUNE, 1939)." THE DATE IS WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE . THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MR. SAM MARGOLIN. THE INTERVIEW IS BY A. MARK LEVIN, A STUDENT IN THE ORAL HISTORY CLASS OF DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY OFFICE. THE INTERVIEW WAS TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY A. MARK LEVIN.

MARK LEVIN: Mr. Margolin, I appreciate the opportunity to interview you, and I wonder if you might begin with some brief biographical background about yourself. Where were you born, and what year?

MR. MARGOLIN I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1910, which means that I am approaching my 80th birthday. I moved away from Memphis during my early childhood, until my father died, which was in 1921, so that for the last sixty-some-odd years I have been a resident here.

MARK LEVIN: And where did your parents come from?

MR. MARGOLIN: They came from a small community, not too far from Vilna, which at that time, I believe, was part of Russia rather than Poland, but I'm not certain.

MARK LEVIN: And what year did they arrive here? Were

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That this interview will be used by no one except the interviewee, A. MARK LEVIN, and the interviewer, MR. SAM MARGOLIN, for a period of 5 years without the written consent of both the interviewer and the interviewee. In the event of the death of either of the above mentioned parties during this period of time written consent must be secured from the surviving party. At the expiration of 5 years from this date the interview will become the unrestricted property of Memphis State University unless the period of restriction is extended by the interviewee.

PLACE Memphis, Tn.

DATE Wed, October 25, 1989



(Interviewee)

A. Mark Levin

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
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they married when they arrived?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, as a matter of fact, they had two or three children. There were only two of us, I think, that were born here. My late brother, Joe and I, and I think that there were three -- there were five children all together -- there were six actually, and four of them were born in Europe. Two of us were born in the United States.

MARK LEVIN: Why did your parents leave Vilna?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, they didn't live in Vilna, actually, and there was a matter of economics, I assume, more than anything else. They come from a rather impoverished background, from a small rural area. And, I suppose that shortly after the marriage, I understand that they moved to Kirnislav, which later became Petro -- Petrovsk, I believe, and stayed there a year or two. My father had some difficulty in earning a livelihood, and so my mother had some relatives that were living in Memphis. Thought they would have a better opportunity, and so they came here, I believe, in the year 1905.

MARK LEVIN: That's five years before you were born.

MR. MARGOLIN: I think that's right.

MARK LEVIN: The diminished economic opportunities that your parents had in that area of Poland/Russia at the time, was anti-Semitism a factor?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, it was. As a matter of fact, my mother frequently related pogroms [riots against Jews] that took place in their community. The necessity of

hiding. I think at one time she said that she hid the children in an oven because of the pogroms that were taking place regularly. So it was not too far removed from, I believe, the pogrom at Kishinev. It was somewhere about that time. And I would imagine that probably that weighed more heavily than the opportunity for economic advantages, because those they did not realize in this country either, they were rather hard-pressed financially. My father died when I was quite young, and my mother was left with five children, and so there was never any real economic stability achieved in this country either. So, I would imagine that it was that constant threat to the safety of the family. But -- and that also incidentally took place at the time that my father who preceded her here a year or two. And she was left alone with the children, and so it was simply a matter of survival.

MARK LEVIN: When your father arrived in Memphis, what did he do to support himself?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I think it was customary in those days for them to begin as a peddler. They were not familiar with the language, and so there was a family -- Alperin family, and one of them was really quite sympathetic and of great assistance to the immigrants, and he was in the dry goods business. He would give them some merchandise on credit, and they would simply walk through the adjacent rural communities and peddle their property -- their merchandise -- to these families. It was somewhat far removed from urban areas. And following that, I believe they opened a store, a

dry goods store, in the Pinch. This took place just about the time that I was born. That was not too successful, so they moved into a small community in Columbus, Mississippi, where they lived only two years because the children were growing up. They were afraid that they were being deprived of association with Jewish people, and so they moved to Birmingham, Alabama, where we lived until my father passed away. Then my mother had relatives in Memphis --

MARK LEVIN: Which was in 1921?

MR. MARGOLIN: 1921. My mother had three brothers and one sister living here, and so we came to Memphis.

MARK LEVIN: And where did you go to elementary school?

MR. MARGOLIN: Here in Memphis. At Southside High School was where I went to school.

MARK LEVIN: That was the high school?

MR. MARGOLIN: No, that was the grammar school.

MARK LEVIN: The grammar school.

MR. MARGOLIN: I'm sorry, I went to -- when I came -- I was somewhat precocious as a child, and when I came to Memphis I was eleven years old, so they tested me to see where they would put me, and they put me in the graduating class, the eighth grade of the elementary school, which was Leath on Linden Avenue, and after a year, I went to Southside High School. I graduated that quite young, really, about 15.

MARK LEVIN: In 1924?

MR. MARGOLIN: In 1925, when I was fifteen years old.

MARK LEVIN: After you graduated high school, you went to college?

MR. MARGOLIN: No, I did not. We were unable to provide the necessary finances for that purpose. I went to night law school, and -- here in Memphis. And I worked during the day at the newspaper. At that time, it was the News Scimitar, later became merged with the Memphis Press-Scimitar, and I worked there in the Advertising Department, selling classified ads, very unsuccessfully, actually. And I worked my way through law school. Finished in 1928, I believe it was, and after having my disability of minority removed, I began to practice law. Later started a law school -- also a night law school.

MARK LEVIN: In what year?

MR. MARGOLIN: 1931. Closed it in 1964 to turn the enrollment -- the student body, the library and make it possible for Memphis State to have a full-time law school, because they thought that we had a rather large enrollment in the night school -- they thought that it would impinge upon the possibility of success.

MARK LEVIN: At the same time, did you continue some other business activities?

MR. MARGOLIN: Do you mean while I was practicing law?

MARK LEVIN: Yes.

MR. MARGOLIN: No. I practiced law until 1948.

MARK LEVIN: In your own office?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, in my own office. Well, actually, I was associated only sharing expenses for a short time with another lawyer, but then I had my own office. I opened the law school in 1931, practiced during the day and taught law school in the evening. In 1948, following the war, I joined my brothers, whom I had placed in the construction business following the war. Gave up the practice of law, and we went into the construction business; later into the mortgage business. And that was in the year 1951.

MARK LEVIN: In the course of my research in The Hebrew Watchman, I came across an announcement of your engagement to Mrs. Margolin.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, she was living in Birmingham at the time. Her family name was Leader, and we married in 1933, so that would be -- what -- 56 years ago.

MARK LEVIN: May they increase in good health.

MR. MARGOLIN: Bless you, thank you.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall when your association with the Baron Hirsch Congregation began?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, very vividly. It began with my marriage actually. When I was single, my parent -- my mother, that is, was a member. At that time, I think the membership dues minimum was a dollar a month, which was about all that she could afford. And then when I married, I became a member, and some time after I became a member of the Board of Trustees.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall in what year you became a member of the Board of Trustees?

MR. MARGOLIN: That's a little difficult for me to recall.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall who was President at the time?

MR. MARGOLIN: Oh yes, Will Gerber was President.

MARK LEVIN: Under his administration?

MR. MARGOLIN: Under his administration, and the Rabbi at the time that I joined was Rabbi Stampfer, who was your predecessor [the interviewer, A. Mark Levin, was Rabbi of the Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation, at the time of the interview and known to Mr. Margolin in that capacity] many, many years ago at the Anshei Sphard. He was succeeded by Rabbi Taxon, who died, I forget exactly the year. Probably 1938-1939, I believe.

MARK LEVIN: After 1938 -- 1939 or 1940.

MR. MARGOLIN: And then Rabbi Goodman became -- they brought him in from England. That was after the outbreak of the war. He served as Rabbi until his death, I think, until 1960 or 1961.

MARK LEVIN: If we might go back to the years in Memphis in which you graduated high school, in 1925, had graduated from of night law school in 1928; and in 1931, you had established your own night law school. Memphis at that time was a very racially-segregated city.

MR. MARGOLIN: It was indeed.

MARK LEVIN: Could you describe some of the dimensions of that --

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, it was probably difficult to really imagine it if you didn't live through it. For example, at the Courthouse and in all places there were separate toilet facilities. There were toilets for white men and [toilets for] colored men. [Toilets for] white women, [and toilets for] colored women. The same was also true of the drinking fountains. These were public places. They [the blacks] were not permitted to attend any places of entertainment -- the movies, for example, except that they had what they used to call the "peanut gallery" at the third or fourth dimension, and they allowed some of the blacks to sit there. They were not allowed to go into any of the restaurants, and they had to sit at the back end of the public conveyances.

MARK LEVIN: What about housing patterns?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, obviously, it was pretty much of a ghetto situation. I mean, there were one or two areas of Memphis. Orange Mound, for example, was one. I forgot the name of the other, but they were not permitted to infiltrate into the white areas at all.

MARK LEVIN: What about educational opportunities?

MR. MARGOLIN: Completely limited -- their [schools] they were 100 percent black, of course. The teachers, likewise, were black, and I think rather illy prepared for their responsibilities. But there was a remarkable thing about that. With integration came a tremendous increase in criminal activity. The truth of the matter is as wrong as it was, the blacks were kept in a repressed

situation wherein they were simply terrified of white man's justice; and consequently, criminal activity on the part of the black population was confined really, to crimes of black against black. By way of example, an almost certain result of the rape of a white woman by a black was the electric chair. It was --

MARK LEVIN: Not preceded by lynching?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I don't remember any lynching taking place in Memphis. It did in Mississippi, perhaps, and possibly in Arkansas. I can remember reading about one or two, but that wasn't as prevalent as you might think.

MARK LEVIN: Not in the 1930s. It was much earlier --

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, yes. But the truth of the matter is that the Klan was very active in those earlier years. I had just reached adolescence -- maturity -- and they kept a very heavy hand. But, as I say, crimes against white people were extremely rare. I suppose there was some petty larceny and criminal activity of that character, but [the crimes we are] now seeing with reference to homicides, with reference to rape and similar offenses, were almost non-existent. They were simply terrified. Unfortunately, that's the price one has to pay for liberty. And I'm not suggesting this is too high a price to pay. But as I look back upon things that I accepted as a matter of course, having been born in the south; having known nothing any different -- As a matter of fact, I remember that we had a statute on the books



which was called "Miscegenation," where it was a criminal offense for a black to marry a white or vice versa. I remember how surprised, not particularly upset, when I was first able to visit New York, for example, and I saw a black man with a white woman, or a black woman with a white man. It was simply not committed in the south. I say it with a great deal of shame in retrospect, but it was taken as a matter of course.

MARK LEVIN: The great waves of Jewish immigration that came to the United States from 1880 through 1921, and your parents were clearly part of this great wave.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, they were.

MARK LEVIN: Most of the Jews came both in pursuit of better economic opportunities and also connected to anti-Semitism. Pogroms, riots, quotas. And your parents had experienced this themselves.

MR. MARGOLIN: Very much, yes.

MARK LEVIN: As had many of the Jews in Memphis who came as part of that great wave. What did Jews feel about the racial discrimination that they witnessed perpetrated against the blacks?

MR. MARGOLIN: I don't know if they were particularly vocal about it. The posture of the Jewish Community, as well as I can reconstruct it, was unhappily not to become involved. Not to step out in front, because anti-Semitism prevailed in the area -- in our part of the world, just as anti-black existed against the blacks. The only

difference was that during daylight hours, association was rather common and commerce was freely permitted [between Jews and non-Jews]. Social contacts were permitted during daylight hours. After dark, a Jew was almost never invited to any activity in which the non-Jewish community was involved. So that we were similarly threatened, and the relationship between Jew and black was good. Because we were both threatened at that time.

MARK LEVIN: As a result of that threat, did the Jewish Community support welfare for the blacks? When I say "welfare," [I mean philanthropic] private attempts to house, feed, medical care, legal aid. Perhaps to organize -- sharecroppers?

MR. MARGOLIN: Let me -- in the 1930's. Now, in the 1930's I was already practicing law. The Memphis Jewish Community was somewhat more affluent than it was in the earlier years. They hardly took a leadership role in protesting against the activities against the blacks -- until in recent proportions at the Martin Luther King era. There were Jews that participated in public meetings; that participated in marches. One of our Rabbis here, I think of Beth Sholom [Synagogue] ...

MARK LEVIN: Rabbi [Ari] Becker.

MR. MARGOLIN: Rabbi Becker went to Washington and chained himself to the [White House] in protest. But that was the general attitude, and gravely deplored. When we saw what happened in my home -- not my hometown where I lived



for some years, in Birmingham, with this horrible person called Bull Connor.

MARK LEVIN: In the 1960's.

MR. MARGOLIN: In the 1960's, with the dogs being unleashed and, as a matter of fact, where those two little black girls were killed in the church on Sunday morning at Sunday school, was within two blocks of where I lived as a child.

MARK LEVIN: And it is your feeling that the Jewish Community did not assume a high profile or visible role in the 1930's because they themselves experienced anti-Semitism and were fearful for themselves.

MR. MARGOLIN: I'm afraid that's true.

MARK LEVIN: Could we explore -- how would you characterize social anti-Semitism? That Jews after dark were not invited to socialize. What other aspects would manifest anti-Semitism?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, we were not permitted, obviously, in any of their country clubs. And that -- the activities of the Klan were given prominence in the press.

MARK LEVIN: Although nothing actually happened personally to any Jew in Memphis?

MR. MARGOLIN: As far as I know, there was nothing like that.

Incidentally, I remember my own family, my mother, who was raising, as I said, these orphans, earned her living by renting what we called then light housekeeping



rooms. It was a large house, and she rented rooms in the front part of the house -- the larger house. She rented them to white tenants. In the back, she had some little shanties that were rented [to blacks], and when they couldn't pay the rent, she didn't insist, and when they couldn't pay the rent, she would feed them. There were individual acts of great compassion. And the Jewish Community who were largely immigrants. I mean, I am a first-generation American, and at that time I was in the minority. Most other [Jews] had experienced the anti-social pressures.

MARK LEVIN: Are you suggesting that because they were new immigrants, struggling to establish themselves economically, culturally, that they did not have any residual energies to participate in the political process that meant going against the establishment?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, you see, in Memphis we were somewhat strangely situated. We were living under a benevolent dictator. I am speaking of a period of time where Ed Crump was the political dictator.

MARK LEVIN: From 1915 or 1916, from his first election until his death in 1954.

MR. MARGOLIN: Exactly. Now, I was practicing law from 1929 until 1948, so that was almost twenty or thirty years. And I could tell you that he was a benevolent dictator. He wanted the very best for the city of Memphis, but a dictator he was. Now, he had as his first lieutenant -- one of his first lieutenants -- the leader of the Jewish

Community . That was Will Gerber. Will Gerber was -- I think he moved here as a very young man from Chicago, I believe. He rose to a position of prominence. He went to night law school. Not mine, because he was older than I. And he became the Attorney General, and he kept the Jewish Community in line. I mean, he was very persuasive would be one way of putting it. But he persuaded them by pointing out the consequences of opposing Mr. Crump, and the Jews simply didn't want to get involved. You may want to expunge all of this later from the record, because what I'm saying is not very common memory, but it is certainly true.

Now, I can remember that the lawyer with whom I was associated was one of his Chassidim [Hebrew for "close follower"]. But he was told just what he could do and what he couldn't do, even to the extent of denying him the right to represent one of Mr. Crump's enemies, who was being charged with murder. Now, my associate was a criminal lawyer, and Mr. Crump didn't want to -- he wanted to see the man punished. Mr. Crump [did], and he was punished, but he could control your economic well-being; and there was always overhanging the threat that Mr. Gerber could see that your taxes were raised. And he could see that all kinds of consequences -- if you didn't adhere to the line. Now, I don't know what that has to do with the subject we're discussing, other than the Jewish Community was intimidated. They were intimidated by him from a political standpoint.



They were intimidated by a rather shaky financial structure of their own.

MARK LEVIN: The depression years as well. In addition to being new immigrants struggling to establish themselves.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, from 1930 until the war -- around 1935, so it was a poor community. It was a frightened community. It was an immigrant community, by and large. Those who were born in America had not yet grown to adulthood, and my recollection is that one of just "don't get involved."

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall, Mr. Margolin, as an attorney, that certain professional avenues were blocked to you because you were Jewish?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I wasn't dependent upon them. The truth of the matter is that Mr. Crump had no prejudice against the Jews. He was not prejudiced against them. Some of his closest associates were Jewish. Jews, for example, were chancellors. There was a [Israel] Peres.

MARK LEVIN: Hardwig Peres.

MR. MARGOLIN: His brother-- Hardwig Peres' brother. I forget his first name. Just a little bit before my time. And we didn't feel discriminated from the standpoint of politically, as long as we adhered to the line.

MARK LEVIN: For example, Judge [Irving] Strauch, who graduated at the top of his class from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

MR. MARGOLIN: He chartered my law school.



MARK LEVIN: He was very gracious in acknowledging his debt to you, but when he graduated at the top of his class with all the honors, he shared with me in an interview that he could not find a job in Memphis, Tennessee. That all the doors of all the attorneys' offices were closed to him, and he felt that it was because he was a Jew.

MR. MARGOLIN: That might well have been true. The truth of the matter was I didn't aspire to a job. It never occurred to me that I could do well by associating in a large firm. In those days a large firm consisted of eight or ten lawyers. I mean, we didn't have these tremendous factories. But I went into practice myself and particularly, because I had the law school, which was perhaps a very significant part of my activity and income.

MARK LEVIN: Were there any other blocked opportunities to Jews, for example, quotas in the colleges or universities -- medical school, dental school.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, I think there were. I didn't go to college myself; and therefore, it was not a personal experience, but quotas, of course, were frequently mentioned. And there's no question that is true. But of course, again, Memphis was somewhat removed from that. The truth of the matter is that my peers at that time--probably fewer than 10 percent went to college. They had to get out and work, as I did.

MARK LEVIN: And so are you suggesting that there was anti-Semitism in these areas, but it didn't --



but it also didn't impact as greatly because there wasn't as great a demand on the part of Jews to go into medical school or dental school.

MR. MARGOLIN: Exactly, but there were quotas there. No question about it. But that I think is a matter of just public record. As a matter of fact, it was no different than other communities in that respect.

MARK LEVIN: If we might shift the focus for a few minutes, Mr. Margolin. Had the Jewish Community in Memphis become aware of Hitler's accession to power, and finally his installation as Chancellor of Germany? And one of his first acts was to declare an economic boycott against Jewish-owned stores and businesses in Germany.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall that?

MR. MARGOLIN: Very vividly, yes.

MARK LEVIN: We're talking April the 1st, 1933.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, that was because I had a few other things on my mind. I was still on my honeymoon at that time -- 1933. Secondly, I was suffering from the depression, as most people were. And we grieved over it. But that was pretty much the extent. The truth of the matter is that at that early date, we still had hopes that Von Hindenberg (who had won the election in March, I think, the same time that Roosevelt was elected) would show less animosity to the Jewish Community than Hitler did. We thought that he [Hitler] was some rabble-rouser, and we didn't take him seriously in those early days.



MARK LEVIN: Do you recall any efforts in Memphis at that time, in 1933, to organize a counter-boycott against German products?

MR. MARGOLIN: No, there was none to my knowledge.

MARK LEVIN: In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, which disenfranchised the Jewish citizens of Germany, even though they had lived in Germany for almost eight hundred years, and those were reported in the Memphis newspapers. Do you recall the passage of the Nuremberg laws?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, I do recall that, and I recall that it was deplored by the community as a whole, but certainly --

MARK LEVIN: How was it deplored by the community as a whole? What were the avenues through which it was deplored?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, my recollection is that the great hero of the Jewish Community at that time was Franklin Roosevelt. We thought that he was the Messiah. We thought that he was the greatest friend to the Jewish people. He was certainly a great friend to humanity, and he enjoyed a popularity among the Jewish Community that has never since been repeated. We really thought, and he did accomplish some tremendous things -- to lift us out of the depression. Of course, the week that I got married, they closed the banks, and following that he had enacted some tremendously effective acts -- the NRA [National Recovery Act], for example, and the Homeowners Loan Corporation that prevented bankruptcies. I

mean foreclosures, and prevented banks from going broke. And he expressed the sentiment I think that the Jews felt. And we felt that he was sincere. We later had reason to reconsider. But we felt that he was a true friend of the Jews, and that we could pretty well leave it in his hands. I remember an incident. I had to go to Washington to represent a client. This had to be in 1942, 1943. And we stayed at a hotel called the Henry Hay House, which was just across the park from the White House. And I remember that we -- Skip [Mr. Margolin's wife] and I -- looked across and saw a light in the White House and said what a wonderful feeling it is to know that President Roosevelt is there and that he is looking after the interests of the people.

MARK LEVIN: So when we talk about that the Memphis Jewish Community deplored the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, there were no mass meetings to deplore it in the Jewish Community or the general [community].

MR. MARGOLIN: That's right. As a matter of fact, I'm not too sure that they understood the full impact of that, the Nuremberg Laws. We listened to the radio at that time, couldn't understand what he was saying. And we had the feeling that the man was obviously a madman, and that sooner or later Germany would come to its senses.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall, as a member of Baron Hirsch, the Rabbi of the Baron Hirsch Congregation, speaking out in his sermons, which took place mostly on Friday night because that was when they had most of the people

coming, because they were mostly working folks who worked on Saturdays. Do you recall the Rabbi speaking out in an attempt to express the feelings of the Community or to shape and educate the community?

MR. MARGOLIN: I simply don't remember the sermons. I'm sure that that must have been the focus of it. I don't remember that Baron Hirsch had a larger attendance on Friday. They did have Friday night forums, but they had a rather irregular existence and the Jewish Community, while small at that time, was predominantly Orthodox, because they were, as I say, first -- they were, primarily, immigrants, and they adhered to their religious beliefs. We didn't have a Conservative Synagogue here until many, many years later. The Temple was always represented to the Orthodox Community as something -- as a class to which they couldn't aspire -- that they were the affluent members of society and this sort of thing.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall any discussion taking place at Board meetings at the Baron Hirsch Congregation, either when Will Gerber was President, about the plight of the Jewish Community in Germany, because what was going to unfold in Europe was still unknown. But at least in Germany, and that, just in terms of educating the membership or trying to get support of the membership to empower him as the President to dealing.....

MR. MARGOLIN: I'm afraid I wasn't there then. If there

were any, I don't remember them, and I very seriously doubt if there was. I'm sure from the pulpit these matters were mentioned. But insofar as leadership on the part of the Board is concerned, I can't remember anything like that taking place.

I can tell you that we pinned our hopes on the fact that America inevitably would have to enter into the war as it did in the first world war; and that would spell the end of Hitler. It didn't occur to us how very close he came to winning the war. At that time we thought America, of course, was invincible, and as soon as she, after Pearl Harbor, particularly, we felt that we had nothing further to worry about.

MARK LEVIN: If we might move along into November, 1938, you are familiar with the events that have come to be known as "Kristalnacht?"

MR. MARGOLIN: Yeah, I remember it very well.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall any discussion amongst the Jewish Community, either the conversations between the man on the street, when people met for social occasions. Was this a topic of discussion?

MR. MARGOLIN: It was a topic of discussion, yes, it really was.

MARK LEVIN: Was this discussed in the Jewish Community in public forums?

MR. MARGOLIN: No, not that I know. I don't know of any



meetings that were called. I don't know of any mass meetings that took place, that were called or sponsored by any of the Jewish organizations. I think that the general feeling was that whatever the Jewish Community said would have very little effect. And that the best hope that they had of correcting this situation would be to involve the non-Jews or the Christian world, and they felt that the pressure that they might be able to bring to bear upon the religious leaders of the world, unhappily a great deal -- a greater faith was placed in the power and the ability of the Church of Rome -- of the Pope to intercede. But we felt that of course you would expect the Jews to be affected, and to protest. But if we could get the non-Jewish world to do it, maybe it would have some result.

MARK LEVIN: I think that the plight of the German Jewish Community was personalized more in the journey of the St. Louis, of 907 passengers who had obtained visas to enter Cuba, which were subsequently repudiated, and attempts were made to try and get them visas for entry to the United States. Do you recall any discussion in the Memphis Jewish Community about some activity that might take place to facilitate this?

MR. MARGOLIN: Not emanating from Memphis. There was the hope that Roosevelt would change his mind about it. There was some hope that there were Jewish members -- Morgenthau was a member of his cabinet, I believe, at that time. There was a member of the Supreme Court -- I think



Felix Frankfurter was a member of the Supreme Court -- or at least in the Appellate Court. And there were men -- Jewish people of great prominence. And the Rabbinical people, for example. [Rabbi] Stephen Weiss and one or two others of that character. And we thought, as nearly as I can recall right now, that they had the ability, the leadership and the skill with which to bring about perhaps -- I suppose that we were reluctant to believe that this was a decision that was made by Roosevelt that it was dictated by the fact that America was not yet ready to antagonize Germany, because it was not yet ready to enter into foreign entanglements.

The truth of the matter is that there were some -- America was very sharply divided into two camps, and I can't say in which the majority lay. For example, one of our great heroes was Charles Lindbergh. Charles Lindbergh received a medal from Hitler. Another one was Henry Ford. Now he had had a history of being an anti-Semite, but he later recanted and made a public apology and that sort of thing, but nevertheless, he was very much on the side of the isolationists. There was a Burton Wheeler, who had tremendous political clout. Perhaps the one that we can focus on best was Joe Kennedy, who at that time was the Ambassador to England. Now these were people who said not that Hitler was right. I don't think they would have the audacity to have said that, but they said that Hitler was provoked into it by unfair activities on the part of the allies, what was demanded in the way of reparations against the Weimar Republic.



That we could understand why he felt that way, but in any event, it was internal and it was none of our business. That is, America's business.

MARK LEVIN: In 1938 was the height of isolationist sentiment in Memphis.

MR. MARGOLIN: In America, yes.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall Father Coughlin?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes. I think he is still living.

MARK LEVIN: He died recently. In the last two or three years he died. Do you recall ever hearing his radio program?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, yes, I certainly do. And, of course, I don't know that we ever tried to answer him. We said the best thing to do would be to ignore him.

MARK LEVIN: And yet he had two and a half million listeners,

MR. MARGOLIN: He was much like, well, Jim Bakker. There's the same situation there. How many listeners did he have? But Father Coughlin was violent, and again, the sentiment was that the more violent and the more irrational they were, the less credence that they would have and acceptance by the people generally. We were wrong. He did influence. He cut a figure. Like Joe McCarthy did. A tremendous effect. As Lindbergh did, and as Joe Kennedy did, and those are only some of the names that immediately jump to my mind.

MARK LEVIN: In the past five years, the Memphis Jewish



Community has energized itself to speak out publicly on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Had mass public rallies, with the media there, the television, the newspapers. To what do you attribute the fact that in late 1938 or 1939, Kristalnacht, the journey of the St. Louis, that similar activity did not take place?

MR. MARGOLIN: We certainly did not have the leadership, both lay and spiritual leadership, that we have now.

MARK LEVIN: In Memphis, Tennessee?

MR. MARGOLIN: In Memphis, Tennessee. I can't speak of any area other than Memphis. Yet, this one Orthodox Shul [Synagogue]. Well, there were two. The Shul which has prospered so under your administration and earlier, was then a very small Congregation -- a very small Congregation. It had no Rabbi. I think [Rabbi] Stampfer was the first Rabbi that they had, as I remember it. I'm not too sure. After he left Baron Hirsch and he went over there. And the Temple -- they were secularists at that time, and you see, we weren't marshalled into any particular direction. We didn't have the leadership, and I think that's the point. Coupled with the fact --

MARK LEVIN: Although you did indicate that Mr. Gerber was a very forceful, articulate, intimidating outspoken leader, not only of the Baron Hirsch Congregation, but of the Jewish Community.

MR. MARGOLIN: I don't know that his interest extended out-



side of Memphis. He was a very selfish person. A very feared person. And we don't speak ill of the dead, but he had many enemies. Many enemies, of their own making. And the truth of the matter is that I don't think he had any interest outside of -- if he ever, for example, asked Mr. Crump to join in any protest, I never heard of it.

MARK LEVIN: That's a very critical point, Mr. Margolin.

Mr. Gerber was a lieutenant, a right-hand man.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes he was.

MARK LEVIN: And he probably had a file on Mr. Crump -- on Mr. Crump's practice of voting the blacks a few times; of Mr. Crump's intimidation of the press, manipulation, in which, had Mr. Gerber felt strongly enough about the issue, he could have communicated this concern to Mr. Crump.

MR. MARGOLIN: Oh, I think he fairly approved of everything that Mr. Crump did in the matters of which you speak. As a matter of fact, he was not only agreeable to it, but I think that he was the one, for example, from my early recollection, and probably, perhaps, as I say, all of this ought to be expunged from the record, but -- [the tape-recorder is turned off at this point at interviewee's request]

MARK LEVIN: Mr. Gerber was a right-hand man and a lieutenant of Mr. Crump, who was the city boss and the absolute dictator of Memphis. Mr. Crump was one of



the very early supporters of Roosevelt. Mr. Crump was a person who was socially welcome in the White House because Mr. Crump had the ability to deliver Democratic votes to Roosevelt. For example, in 1940, when Roosevelt had been repudiated by both Memphis newspapers, Mr. Crump continued to support Roosevelt. Mr. Crump had the ability to pick up the phone and to say to President Roosevelt, "I'm coming to Washington. I need to speak to you about a matter of urgency."

MR. MARGOLIN: You mean, with reference to this --

MARK LEVIN: Mr. Crump's relationship with Roosevelt was he said he had the ability to do that. Now the question that I'm exploring is: Did Mr. Gerber ever sit down with Mr. Crump, to the best of anybody's knowledge in the Jewish Community, and say to him, "Mr. Crump" -- that's what they called him -- Mr. Crump -- "the Jewish Community in Germany -- you read in the newspapers -- we've got to do something to get visas for them to come to the United States, and I need you as a friend to speak to President Roosevelt about this."

MR. MARGOLIN: I'm sure he never did. Never would. I tell you what some of us did.

MARK LEVIN: Why do you say he never would? That was just his personality?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, his personality. And I tell you, he was a misanthrope. I don't think the milk of human kindness was in his heart. I think, at most, he gave it a passing thought.



MARK LEVIN: What did some of you do?

MR. MARGOLIN: With reference to him?

MARK LEVIN: With reference to visas for German Jews?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I was practicing law at that time, and so I would send an agreement, a contract to say that these people were needed to serve as spiritual leader of Congregation Mishne. Now the Congregation had a little Synagogue there, and probably during that entire period, had about a hundred and fifty Rabbis. The point being that once they came into the country, under that guise, which was, of course everybody knew what was happening, including the immigration authorities, and were glad to --

MARK LEVIN: Did you assume responsibility -- financial responsibility -- for them?

MR. MARGOLIN: Oh yes, on all of them we had to say that we --

MARK LEVIN: You refer to yourself personally.

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I and others.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall how many papers you signed, personally assuming responsibility -- 10, 20, 40, 60?

MR. MARGOLIN: I don't remember numbers -- but I tell you there was a wonderful Rabbi here. He was not head of a pulpit, but he was associated with Congregation Mishne. He was -- he had no salary or anything. But this thing -- he just wouldn't let you rest. And he was in the office almost the entire day. "Have a new name." For



example, we brought over every member of the Rosenberg family, which gave me a great deal of pleasure. And there were forms that had to be filled out, and --

MARK LEVIN: So you not only facilitated from a legal point of view, but you personally assumed financial responsibility for them.

MR. MARGOLIN: No more than other people did. Of course, I did sign, but was never called upon to do that.

MARK LEVIN: Can you recall the names of other members of the Jewish Community who likewise signed and assumed financial responsibility?

MR. MARGOLIN: I would imagine the Blockman family. Morris Blockman, probably signed as many papers as I did. I'm trying to remember. There were a core of us, that felt --

MARK LEVIN: Was this activity done through the Jewish Welfare Fund?

MR. MARGOLIN: No, that was individually.

MARK LEVIN: That was independent of the Jewish Welfare Fund. Do you know of any efforts that the Jewish Welfare Fund -- the President at that time was Dr. Louis Levy, I believe.

MR. MARGOLIN: The Jewish Welfare Fund was outside of my kind of knowledge at that time. First of all, I wasn't earning enough to contribute substantially to it. Secondly, it was pretty much an organization of the



members of the Temple, rather than of the Orthodox Community until there were one or two of the Shainberg family; and the Belz family came along, that Orthodoxy had very little standing within the Welfare and this sort of thing. The Federation, or whatever they called it at that time. I remember Dr. Louis Levy. He was an ear/nose/throat doctor, and why, what particular contribution he could make I just don't know.

MARK LEVIN: But you don't recall any efforts by the Jewish Welfare Fund?

MR. MARGOLIN: I'm sure there might have been, but I wasn't a party to it.

MARK LEVIN: Okay, in addition to Mr. Gerber, who was an appointed official, a County Attorney.

MR. MARGOLIN: No, he was the Attorney General.

MARK LEVIN: Attorney General. Shelby County?

MR. MARGOLIN: Shelby County Attorney General, and I think he had to be elected to that.

MARK LEVIN: Okay, he was elected, but once the Crump machine [endorsed him, his election was a certainty] -- Were there other Jews, to the best of your knowledge, who supported the Crump machine as political supporters by way of large contributions, affluent Jews, even though they did not aspire to hold any political office?

MR. MARGOLIN: What was the first part of the question? I'm sorry.

MARK LEVIN: Were there any other Jews in Memphis who sup-



ported the Crump machine, prominent wealthy people who made large donations, like for example, today there are particular families that support the local Senators and the Congressmen, who could have the ability, because of that support, to pick up the phone, even though they don't aspire to elected office or appointed office?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, you understand that I was on the wrong side of the tracks. I was raised on the wrong side of the tracks. These people -- there were very prominent families here -- the Wurzburg family. Newberger, particularly. All members of the Temple. They didn't know me, and I certainly didn't know them. We had no point of contact, no social contact, and I really wouldn't know. I really wouldn't know. As I say, my contributions -- my ability to contribute, either financially or by way of any role of leadership, was extremely limited.

MARK LEVIN: I'm asking about your knowledge as a young attorney. Did other Jews, in addition to Mr. Gerber, support the Crump machine in a significant way financially?

MR. MARGOLIN: Let's put it this way. There were none of them who would oppose him.

MARK LEVIN: Were there Jews who made \$5,000 a year donations to the Crump machine?

MR. MARGOLIN: I don't think the Crump machine needed donations. Mr. Crump didn't solicit the public generally. But Mr. Crump only needed one thing. In Kansas



City, for example, I think the boss there [Mayor Pendergast] -- all he wanted was the exclusive right to sell ready-mix concrete. All Mr. Crump wanted was the exclusive right to sell insurance. And Mr. Crump never took a bribe, so far as I know. Never took a dishonest dollar. I mean, he had a legitimate business, and so far as I know, never asked for any campaign contributions from anybody.

MARK LEVIN: Mr. Crump, of all the city bosses, has been characterized as one of the city bosses who didn't feed at the public trough.

MR. MARGOLIN: No question, he was -- and particularly the latter years of his life, which he had probably some twenty years after his son died. I don't remember specifically, but about that time. He was a fine man.

MARK LEVIN: If we could have a look at some other Memphians whom we mentioned already. Memphis had a senator by the name of Senator McKellar.

MR. MARGOLIN: McKellar, I knew him well, personally.

MARK LEVIN: Who was Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. As such, he wielded a great deal of power. Were there any prominent members of the Jewish Community who could access him. Speak to him in Washington -- say "I'm coming to visit you. I need to talk to you."

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, Ed Crump could tell him what to do. You know, when he'd tell him to jump, he'd say "how high?" Ed could put him in office and Willie Gerber could have done the same through Mr. Crump.



MARK LEVIN: You mentioned that you knew him personally.

MR. MARGOLIN: I knew him personally many years later, and I had to go see him with one of Mr. Crump's lieutenants, in a matter relating to my law school. I don't remember the circumstances, but I needed something from the Veterans' Administration. I met Mr. McKellar.

MARK LEVIN: Do you recall what year that was in? Approximately?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, probably 1945, 1946. It was after the war.

MARK LEVIN: Senator McKellar was an influential senator by virtue of his chairmanship of the Senate Appropriations Committee?

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, indeed.

MARK LEVIN: And in those days, the Chairman of the Committee told the Committee what to do?

MR. MARGOLIN: I was going to tell you that little incident. I wanted him to do something -- some negligible factor, and he walked around with me to the head of the VA [Veteran's Administration], and said "I want you to do this for Mr. Margolin." It had to do something with reference to the GI Bill and so forth, and he said "If you don't," he said, "the next Appropriation Bill will have an amendment that said no part of this money may be spent to pay your salary." Now, that's the way he would get the thing done, and it was effective.

MARK LEVIN: There was another Tennessean who was very in-



fluent in Washington, and that was Cordell Hull.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, and he was not from Memphis. He was from Nashville. Middle Tennessee.

MARK LEVIN: But Crump's influence did extend throughout the entire Democratic Party?

MR. MARGOLIN: No question.

MARK LEVIN: And Mr. Crump could have accessed Cordell Hull if he wanted to?

MR. MARGOLIN: That's right, but whether he would have had any influence with Roosevelt, I don't know. I don't know whether it extended to the national level [Crump's influence]. I really don't, but certainly he was the one who named whoever was to be placed in office here through the Federal Government. The District Attorney, for example, and I don't know that he was the one that got Mr. Hull the job as Secretary of State. I doubt that very much. I don't even know whether they were political allies. I really don't remember that. I do know that Mr. Crump later fell out with a number of his political allies. I'm trying to remember the name of one of them who was the Governor here -- Browning, Gordon Browning, and they later became bitter enemies. That sort of thing.

MARK LEVIN: There was another young Memphian who was a very prominent attorney, Abe Fortas.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, I went to school with him.

MARK LEVIN: Who was attorney to Mr. [Harold] Ickes, the



Secretary of the Interior. Mr. Ickes was close to Eleanor Roosevelt, and probably to President Roosevelt as well.

MR. MARGOLIN: I think Eleanor Roosevelt was considerably more sympathetic to the Jewish problem than her husband. As it later turned out, because of his [unintelligible] and this sort of thing, and I don't know what the truth of the matter is, but at least that was my feeling.

MARK LEVIN: I wonder if it would be preposterous to suggest that there were a number of prominent Tennesseans to whom Memphis Jews could have had access through Mr. Crump or independently of Mr. Crump, who in turn, could have had Mr. Roosevelt's ear -- Senator McKellar, Mr. Hull, Mr. Ickes (through Abe Fortas), and I'm wondering if the Jewish Community in Memphis, its leadership, tried to access these people to lobby them, in the way people lobby today. And that if Mr. Roosevelt would have got phone calls or personal meetings, not just from Frankfurter or from [Rabbi Stephen] Wise in New York, the New York-Washington orbit, but heat from around the country, that would have neutralized anti-Semitic sentiment...labor unions opposed to visas for immigrants to take away jobs. I wonder if that might have impacted on and changed, Mr. Roosevelt's thinking.

MR. MARGOLIN: It could have. Mr. Roosevelt was a very powerful and opinionated man as I remember it.

MARK LEVIN: He was also an astute politician.

MR. MARGOLIN: He was, he was. The point is I don't know

Memphis was a small frog in a small pond. First of all, Memphis was 100 percent Democrat. There was no way he could lose in Memphis. Now, not in the State of Tennessee, perhaps. But nobody would -- I don't know that we had fewer Republicans than we had Arabs here. I mean, you had to be a Democrat to survive in this part of the south.

MARK LEVIN: But by way of contrast or comparison, Mr.

Margolin, today if there were an issue of great urgency that impacted upon the Memphis Jewish Community -- the Jewish people, the Memphis Jewish Community has the ability to access our Senators and our Congressmen to gain their ear, to gain their attention, to educate them, to lobby them, even though the outcome may not be the desired outcome, and that there would be consequences if they did not follow that.

MR. MARGOLIN: I think they weren't aware of their power.

At any rate, they didn't exercise it. They relied on certain national figures to carry the ball for them, and there were a number of them that went to the White House, as I recall it, and I think the general attitude is that if they had no success, who was going to listen to a sleepy town on the banks of the Mississippi River. I mean, that was pretty much the attitude that prevailed. There is no question that, looking back on it, if we had understood our power, just as if the Arabs had understood their power to declare this oil embargo some years earlier than that, it might have had a much more unhappy turn of events.

But at any rate, at that time, it certainly never did occur to me that I had any source to whom I could go to to make a difference. And I thought like everyone else. I was a very young man, and I said, you know, "that's what we have a Rabbi for; that's what we have national leaders for; that's why we have somebody at the head of the American Jewish Congress" (if that was the name of the organization then). And the B'nai Brith was a powerful organization. We felt that national organizations could speak with a unified voice. And we also felt that not too much pressure was needed on Roosevelt until this unhappy -- most of this came out, you know, afterwards -- not about the St. Louis, but about Mr. Roosevelt's true feelings with reference to racial discrimination. We felt that it was impossible.

MARK LEVIN: The single greatest issue confronting the Jewish Community in the United States after Kristalnacht was to extricate the German Jewish Community, find places of refuge, which meant visas, either visas to the United States or in conjunction with other countries. The only act Mr. Roosevelt did was to extend for six months the visitors' visas of businessmen, students, for six months, I believe. He felt that it was inhumane to send them back to Germany in this post-Kristalnacht time. The Memphis Jewish Community understood the urgency of obtaining visas. You and other people --

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, we heard about the exchange of Jews for trucks, for example.

MARK LEVIN: In 1944, Joel Brand.

MR. MARGOLIN: Yes, we knew about those things. And regretted it, we grieved over it -- didn't do much about it.

MARK LEVIN: And the reason why you didn't do much about it -- I say you -- I don't mean you, personally. I'm talking about the Jewish Community, the leadership of the Jewish Community, the lay leadership, the Rabbinic leadership. Why do you think they did not do anything about it?

MR. MARGOLIN: Well, I think I pretty well covered that.

First of all, I think that they just didn't want to step out in front of the parade. Secondly, I think that if they thought about it at all --

MARK LEVIN: And that you attributed to the chilling effect of anti-Semitism?

MR. MARGOLIN: That's right. Secondly, I believe that they felt that all's well with the world and G-d's in his Heaven as long as we got Roosevelt in office. You've got good leaders, both Jewish leaders on the national level, much more effective, better spokesmen. Much better connected, and [thirdly] it was a feeling, perhaps well-deserved, of inferiority. But inferiority complex, nobody has a better right than our leaders -- I mean, I make no apologies, only except to say that I was certainly not in a position of leadership in those days. I was a poor, starving young lawyer, from the wrong side of the tracks, and

MARK LEVIN: I appreciate and I understand that, Mr. Margolin, and this isn't meant to insult you or make you uncomfortable --

MR. MARGOLIN: Oh, I know -- I don't take it -- other than the fact that I -- as a young man, you look back on this in disbelief, as I look back upon our treatment of the blacks. I can't believe it, and my children ask me -- my children remember it. But my grandchildren want to know if it's true, and how could you possibly have stood by and see this happen.

MARK LEVIN: Mr. Margolin, I truly appreciate the time that you've been gracious enough to share with me, and I thank you, and future historians will access this and have a clearer picture of that time.

MR. MARGOLIN: I hope that you will remove my complimentary remarks about Mr. Gerber.



